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SUBJECT: PRC-VATICAN RELATIONS: TAIWAN ON THE SIDELINES

REF: STATE 145435

Classified By: AIT Acting Director David Keegan, Reason 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: Taiwan has been relegated to an observer as the Vatican and the PRC gradually improve ties and slowly work towards diplomatic relations. Taipei's relationship with the Holy See has the full attention of Taiwan government officials, and President Chen Shui-bian has directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the National Security Council (NSC) to use every means possible to preserve Taipei's ties with the Holy See. Taiwan has increased contributions to Vatican sponsored charities, is collecting evidence of PRC abuses against the Church, and is actively lobbying Vatican officials throughout Europe to maintain ties. Taipei is also highlighting Taiwan's record and support for human rights, religious freedom, and democracy. Despite Taipei's efforts, senior officials from the Presidential Office, the NSC, and MOFA privately admit that there is little they can do and are pessimistic that Taiwan can sustain ties with the Vatican beyond the short term. Senior officials are also concerned that the loss of the Vatican could negatively impact Taipei's ties with its Central American partners. End summary.

Attention at the Highest Levels

12. (C) Taiwan-Holy See relations are receiving the full attention of the Taiwan government and is a top priority for the Chen administration. President Chen's Deputy Secretary-General, James Huang, told AIT that Chen is

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personally following the Vatican-PRC situation closely and has ordered MOFA and the NSC to do everything possible to convince the Vatican not to recognize Beijing. Huang said that President Chen believes the loss of the Vatican, Taiwan's sole diplomatic partner in Europe, would damage Taiwan's international image and constitute a substantial victory for Beijing. Huang stressed that the stakes are very high for Taiwan because Vatican ties offer international validation for Taipei's record on human rights and democracy. MOFA's Director of European Affairs, Larry Wang, told AIT that Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (LY) is also watching the Holy See situation closely and like President Chen, the LY views Taiwan-Vatican ties as a top priority. Wang noted that the LY recently ordered Taipei's Ambassador to the Holy See to return to Taiwan to report directly to the LY on the status of Taipei's relationship with the Vatican.

Taiwan's Vatican Strategy

13. (C) Taiwan's strategy for maintaining ties with the Vatican consists of increasing financial support to the Holy See and emphasizing Taipei's moral and human rights values. The Presidential Office's Huang told AIT that Taiwan has significantly increased its budget to support Vatican sponsored charity organizations in an effort to highlight to the Vatican the importance of the Taiwan relationship (Note: Huang would not reveal the amount of money being funneled to the Vatican. End note). The NSC's Senior Advisor Connie Yang added that MOFA issued a directive to its missions abroad to collect intelligence and find evidence of specific examples of human rights abuses committed by Beijing against the Catholic Church for passage to the Holy See. MOFA's Wang told AIT that Taipei has also increased its contacts with the Vatican and has made it a priority to attend virtually all Church sponsored events throughout Europe and elsewhere. However, Wang admitted that Taiwan's efforts are largely in response to the PRC's own efforts to increase its own participation in Church activities.

14. (C) According to the Presidential Office's Huang, Taipei is also trying to convincing the Holy See that it would be immoral for the Vatican to derecognize Taiwan, which is known for its democracy, human rights, and religious freedom, in favor of an authoritarian Communist regime that represses religious freedom. As part of these efforts, MOFA has undertaken a "charm" offensive against Vatican officials and clergy members in Europe to highlight Taiwan's human rights record and press the Holy See not to recognize the PRC. Huang added that Taiwan also insists that Beijing's demand

for the Vatican to sever ties with Taiwan should not be a precondition for diplomatic ties with the PRC. Huang told AIT Taipei has been working with Taiwan's Cardinal Paul Shan who, Huang and MOFA's Wang claim, supports Taiwan and is working on Taipei's behalf at the Holy See.

But Little Taiwan Can Do

15. (C) Despite Taipei's efforts to sustain Vatican-Taiwan ties, senior officials in the Presidential Office and MOFA privately admit to AIT that there is little they can do but watch as the Vatican and the PRC gradually move closer toward official diplomatic ties. The Presidential Office's Huang told AIT that he and other officials are not optimistic about Taipei's ties with the Vatican in the long run. Huang explained that he is in contact with a senior journalist in Beijing who claims that the PRC and the Vatican are making quick progress. Huang added that Taipei's position is particularly precarious because Taiwan is not a factor in the Holy See's decision-making process because it is no secret that the Vatican intends to recognize Beijing as soon as the conditions are right. Vatican Charge d' Affairs in Taipei, Monsignor Ambrose Madtha, told AIT that the Holy See has always wanted and needs diplomatic ties with Beijing for the sake of the Church's estimated 10-15 million Catholics in the PRC and that it is only a matter of time. MOFA's Larry Wang agreed with Huang and noted that there is little Taiwan can do at this point but hope Beijing does something to derail negotiations with the Vatican.

Switch Could Be Politically Damaging for Taiwan

16. (C) Senior Taiwan foreign policy officials are also concerned that the loss of the Vatican could negatively impact Taiwan's ties with its other diplomatic partners, particularly in Central America where the Catholic Church is influential. MOFA's Wang asserted that once the PRC and the Holy See establish ties, Beijing will penetrate the Catholic Church in Central America and gain another avenue in which to pressure Taiwan's Central American partners to recognize Beijing. The Presidential Office's Huang remarked that President Chen is very concerned about the status of Taiwan's relationship with its partners in Central America if the Vatican were to recognize Beijing. Huang explained that such a loss, while symbolic, could tip the scale in the PRC's favor if some governments were wavering in their ties to Taiwan.

17. (C) Huang also maintained that the loss of the Holy See could have a domestic impact in Taiwan, but opined that it would likely be short lived. Huang explained that the Taiwan public is accustomed to "these types of changes" and noted that prospects for losing ties with the Vatican has frequently been reported in the press and would not be a surprise. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) International Affairs Deputy Director Hsieh Huai-hui also speculated that the loss of the Vatican would not severely affect Taiwan's domestic situation, but she noted that this would depend how the event is played in the media and the timing. She argued that if the switch occurred before an election, it could be very damaging for the Chen administration.

Comment: Few Options Left

18. (C) Taiwan's foreign policy officials are resigned to the fact that there is little Taiwan can do but watch and hope that it takes years for the Holy See and the PRC to renew ties. Taiwan is actively doing what it can do derail the thaw in PRC and Vatican relations, but it is clear Taiwan has few options left. Considering that there are 10-15 million unrepresented Catholics in the PRC compared to 300,000 represented Catholics in Taiwan, the Vatican seems determined to seek better ties with Beijing for the sake of the much larger number of Catholics in the PRC. The only question for Taiwan is not if the Vatican will recognize the PRC, but when. In the meantime, Taiwan has been relegated to a spectator while its diplomatic fate is determined by the PRC and the Holy See.

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